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ABSTRACT

The working family is today by far the most common family type in Sweden. However, just over 50 percent of the children of working parents have access to day care. Because Swedish income tax policy is based on the concept that all adults will support themselves and does not take into account the number of persons supported on an income, one parent cannot simply stay home and care for children. Family policy laws recognize a general acceptance of equality between the sexes in the daily care of children. Very generous regulations exist concerning leave for child care, which can be taken by either parent and is paid for not by the employer but by the health insurance system. While presently such parental rights are used far more by women than by men, the people of Sweden are trying to find a new balance of cooperation between men and women in the home and in family life. What is being demanded of young parents today, perhaps excessively, is a new and different competence in developing themselves as professionals, as active members of society, and as responsible and fully engaged parents who share work on an equal basis. The fact that this does not happen without strain is evident. (RH)

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THE WORKING FAMILY

by Monica Boethius

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Now what kind of a headline is this: "The Working Family"? "The family" has indeed always worked, and worked hard, if by "work" you mean taking its share of the responsibility of supporting the group. Less than a hundred years ago it went without saying that the whole family carried the work of support <u>together</u>: man, woman and children. The division of labor was indeed very strict, but everybody in the group had tasks of their own, and carried his or her part of the responsibility.

This goes for most countries in the Western world, and it is important to remember. We often tend to think of the "old" family type as the one out of which the women's liberation movement emanated - the "traditional" family, with one supporter, one wage-earner, and the rest of the family as a group of dependents, persons to be supported, to be cared for.

But this is rather the characteristic of a family type that developed in the latter part of the industrial era, mainly in the early part of the century. I have always found it fruitful and enlightening to remember that as recently as in my grandmother's or great-grandmother's time, back in rural Sweden, both women and children were counted as important members of "the family-working-team". I sometimes think that it might be part of the explanation why the struggle to reach equality between the sexes, the struggle for women's liberation and independence, came so early and was so relatively successful as it has been in Sweden.

The modern concept of "the working family" that we are discussing here, is somewhat different: its characteristics are that two grown-ups (or one, in a one-parent-family) spend most of their working day outside the home, and the time spent together at home is mainly leisure time. This means that the children have to be cared for by somebody else and in most cases somewhere else.

The working family is today by far the most common family type in Sweden. Over 80 percent of the families with children under eight have working parents (from now on I will use the concept "the working parent" only in the meaning of being gainfully employed outside the home).

No wonder that the current debate in Sweden regarding family policy deals with the availability and costs of child care! For many years both state and local authorities were increasing the number of places in municipally operated child care centers. High quality centers were built in both old and new housing areas. But when the heyday of good economic times came to an end and the recession started at the end of the 70s, that program could no longer be sustained. What is now available for families with small children are day-care centers for one-third of the children under seven, and places in after-school centers for some 15 percent of the seven-to-twelve year olds. In private day-care centers or in private homes with "day-mothers" (paid by the local authorities) somewhat fewer children are cared for. In total just over 50 percent of the children of working parents have access to day-care.

What then about the rest? The over 40 percent of children up to the age of 12 whose parents are working? One solution is a part-time job for one or both of the parents. According to Swedish family law, parents with children under eight may have their working day shortened to six hours a day. In some jobs those six hours can be arranged so that the parents can relieve each other during the day. Or parents can choose to work at different times of the day altogether, or during weekends or evenings. All sorts of solutions are being tried out.

One has to bear one thing in mind, that the Swedish income tax system has a basic concept that every grown-up shall support him or herself. That goes for families with children too: the income tax you pay is roughly the same whether you are alone, a childless couple or a family with children. The taxes do not take into consideration how many people must be supported on the income. This means that the seemingly simple solution for child care, that one person stays home with the children while they are little, is not a solution for the majority. Only the very well-to-do can afford to live on one income. The way young Swedish families are now

responding to the trials and difficulties with child care, in a very tight economy, is by having fewer and fewer children. The birthrate has been dropping in Sweden, as in most industrialized countries, for many years. But the last ten years Sweden has been the country in the West with the lowest birthrate of them all: only 1.3 children per fertile woman (2.1 would be necessary to sustain zero population growth). That this is a reaction on the part of young families to the facts presented to them is a very natural conclusion to make. It is simply too complicated and too expensive to have children, or at least to have more than one!

The fall in birthrate, as well as the economic problems facing young families, became hot political issues during the winter of 1983-84. All the political parties have come up with solutions to increase economic support to families with children. It seems as if Parliament will decide during the spring session of 1984 on an increase in child allowances from SEK 3,300* per child/year to SEK 4,800 per child/year. A decision to start building some new day-care centers is also likely.

There is one interesting feature in this. Discussion about why young families choose to have so few children has been going on in Sweden for some years, but there has been no, or at least very little, speculation that the reason is because women work outside their homes to such a large extent. Nor are there any allusions that they lack in responsibility or that they are too materialistic. Those arguments would have been very common in many quarters a decade ago. The content of opinions expressed now have dealt, by and large, with such questions as why young people feel they want to live without children or perhaps with only one child. Why is establishing a family so much more complicated today than it used to be? That is, questions which are the same for men and women.

This attitude is also evident in studies made on young peoples' thoughts about having children and raising a family. In a recent study made on both men's and women's way of reasoning about their lives as professionals, family members and parents or parents-to-be, an egalitarian attitude was prominent. This approach showed up in both the young people being interviewed, and among the researchers.

On the whole, equality between the sexes is nationally accepted in discussions of the many aspects of working and family life. Young adults in Sweden - those belonging to the parent generation - identify themselves both as part of the labor force and as active individuals in society, AND as persons with a family and/or parent identity and responsibility. Both men and women seem to view their job or career as a long-term commitment, while caring for a growing family is for both sexes primarily an interlude.

This attitude is reflected in the family policy laws which recognize a general acceptance of equality between the sexes when it comes to the daily care of the children. There are very generous regulations about child-leave, which can be taken by either parent, paid for not by the employer but from the health insurance system. Briefly, the laws grant

* SEK 1 (Swedish crown) = $0.13 approximately.

1/ a nine-month leave and the right to return to one's job after a child is born (can be divided between the parents as they choose),

2/ up to 60 days leave per year to care for a sick child,

3/ 10 days leave for the father when the mother comes home from giving birth, in order to care for her and any other children in the family,

4/ extra leave for two weeks when the child starts in a day-care center or in school,

5/ the right to a six-hour working day (instead of eight), with a cut in pay, until the child/children are eight years old.

All these parental rights are used far more by women than by men. Figures from 1982 show that only 10 percent of the men use the right to parental leave during the nine months after a baby is born. More than 50 percent stay at home sometimes when the children are ill, but on fewer occasions and for far fewer days than the women. So even if we can say that we are well on the way, it is clear that we still have a long way to go before full equality between the sexes in caring for the children is a reality.

It is worth reflecting a little on why equality between the sexes has come as far in Sweden as it has. And perhaps more important - why we have concerned ourselves with equality in society in general, in working life and in family life. One interesting explanation for this might be that we started in the early 60s to define the issues of equality as important <u>political</u> issues and not as questions that belonged to women's organizations or on the women's pages of the newspapers. A general political issue is something that is dealt with very seriously in the Parliament. Political parties take a stand; they include it in their platform. This is actually what happened in Sweden and that had a lot of implications. Equality between the sexes became a compulsory subject in schools. All school books were examined from the point-of-view of sex discrimination, and for attitudes towards conventional sex roles. We got an "equlity ombudsman" who takes cases of sex discrimination to court, and so on.

This is probably why in Sweden we hit so early right on the hottest issue of all: the responsibility and division of labor in the home when there are two full-time working parents. And that is actually where we still are today, trying to find a new balance of cooperation between men and women in the home and in family life. It appears to be a much more trying and difficult problem to deal with than instituting equality in working life, in politics, or in economic matters. The relation between man and woman, or the role as mother or father, is so deeply rooted in us, and traditions and conventions are strong. What we demand of young parents today is really a new and different competence in developing their own persons both as professionals, as active members of society, and as responsible and fully engaged parents who share the work on an equal basis.

That this does not happen without strain is evident. It is clearly difficult for a man to accept that his wife has a more important

meeting than he when suddenly someone has to stay home to care for a two-year-old with a high fever. Also, attitudes within working life are not all that enlightened, so many men who try to take their share of the household chores are discouraged because they meet with ridicule or scorn. This goes for private enterprise in particular. To take more than one month parental leave is for most men "impossible", whereas most women can easily stay home for the full nine months.

We are still far from the goal of equality to be sure. Of the just over one million families with pre-school children, 18 percent live with only one parent, and in 85 percent of those cases that person is the mother. In the bigger cities that figure is still higher. As many as 40 percent of school-age children do not live with both biological parents - they live with either one parent or in a household with a step-parent.

Though we started this process of creating new family patterns very early, we are still experiencing the growing pains of intense and sometimes too quick social change. We may be paying too high a price for trying to create a society where the roles of parent, worker, child can co-exist for the benefit of all members of the family. Over the years analysts in other countries have referred to Sweden as a "social laboratory". Perhaps that is what we still are, but it might also be the way in which we can share experiences in a changing world of new roles and new responsibilities.

The author alone is responsible for the opinions expressed in this article.

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